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SOLOMON AND ASHMODAI.

[Ever since the appearance of Varnhagen's book (1882), the Indian origin of the legend of *Solomon and Ashmodai* has been taken for granted. This view seems erroneous: the story is of Persian-Mesopotamian provenance, having developed out of the ancient Sacæa or New Year's ritual. The chief *dromenon* of this was the election of a temporary king taking the place of the lawful monarch and expelled or put to death at the end of the feast.]

In the Talmud of Jerusalem, composed, probably, about the year 350 of our era, and in a considerable number of texts derived from it more or less directly, we find the well-known episode of the demon Ashmodai, who assumes the shape and appearance of King Solomon and mounts the latter's throne, while the true king lives miserably in exile, a poor beggar.[1] True to the custom of Oriental monarchs, Ashmodai with the royal power seizes the deposed king's harem, which is so large that he requires three full years to cohabit with every one of its members. When, one day, he wished to approach a woman during her uncleanliness, he received the indignant answer: "Truly, thou art not Solomon!" At last he even wanted to cohabit with Bathseba, Solomon's mother; but she refused, saying: "Thou art not my son Solomon!" And she communicated her secret to Benajahu; the truth came out; the true Solomon was found and reïnstated in his royal splendour.

The Babylonian Talmud, from about 550 of our era, offers a somewhat different version. There the Sanhedrin conceive a suspicion and induce the ladies of the harem to examine closely the feet of the supposed king. They reply that he always appears with his feet covered. Some time later the wise men learn the story of the false Solomon's having wanted to cohabit with unclean women and with Bathseba. Thus the truth is discovered.

The point most interesting to the student of manners is the rôle played by the ladies of Solomon's harem in this discovery of the impostor. Now it is doubtless a noteworthy fact that there

[1] Moser Gaster, *The Exempla of the Rabbis*, London-Leipzig, 1924, p. 80; John D. Seymour, *Tales of King Solomon*, Oxford, 1924, p. 174; Fromer Schnitzer, *Legenden aus dem Talmud*, Berlin, s. d., p. 87; M. Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde*, Leiden, 1893, pp 223 and 272.

exists another Oriental story, reported to be history and, in part at least, doubtless historical, a story which, to my knowledge, has never been compared with the Jewish legend. I refer to the unmasking of the false Smerdis as related in the third Book of Herodotos' great work.[2]

The false Smerdis has usurped the Persian throne and has been reigning for seven months.

But in the eighth month it was revealed who he was, and this is how it was done:—There was one Otanes, son of Pharnaspes, as well-born and rich a man as any Persian. This Otanes was

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[2] Herodotos, III. 68-69: . . . ὀγδόῳ δὲ μηνὶ ἐγένετο κατάδηλος τρόπῳ τοιῷδε. Ὀτάνης ην Φαρνάσπεω μὲν παῖς, γένεϊ δὲ καὶ χρήμασι ὄμοιος τῷ πρώτῳ Περσέων. οὗτος ὁ Ὀτάνης πρῶτος ὑπώπτευσε τὸν Μάγον ὡς οὐκ εἴη ὁ Κύρου Σμέρδις ἀλλ' ὅς περ ἦν, τῇδε συμβαλόμενος, ὅτι τε οὐκ ἐξεφοίτα ἐκ τῆς ἀκροπόλιος καὶ ὅτι οὐκ ἐκάλεε ἐς ὄψιν ἑωυτῷ οὐδένα τῶν λογίμων Περσέων· ὑποπτεύσας δέ μιν ἐποιέε τάδε. ἔσχε αὐτοῦ Καμβύσης θυγατέρα, τῇ οὔνομα ἦν Φαιδύμη· τὴν αὐτὴν δὴ ταύτην εἶχε τότε ὁ Μάγος καὶ ταύτῃ τε συνοίκεε καὶ τῇσι ἄλλῃσι πάσῃσι τῇσι τοῦ Καμβύσεω γυναιξί. πέμπων δὴ ὧν ὁ Ὀτάνης παρὰ ταύτην τὴν θυγατέρα ἐπυνθάνετο παρ' ὅτεῳ ἀνθρώπων κοιμῷτο, εἴτε μετὰ Σμέρδιος τοῦ Κύρου εἴτε μετὰ ἄλλου τευ. ἡ δέ οἱ ἀντέπεμπε φαμένη οὐ γινώσκειν· οὔτε γὰρ τὸν Κύρου Σμέρδιν ἰδέσθαι οὐδαμὰ οὔτε ὅστις εἴη ὁ συνοικέων αὐτῇ εἰδέναι. ἔπεμπε δεύτερα ὁ Ὀτάνης λέγων "Εἰ μὴ αὐτὴ Σμέρδιν τὸν Κύρου γινώσκεις, σὺ δὲ παρὰ Ἀτόσσης πύθευ ὅτεῳ τούτῳ συνοικέει αὐτή τε ἐκείνη καὶ σύ· πάντως γὰρ δή κου τόν γε ἑωυτῆς ἀδελφεὸν γινώσκει."

Ἀντιπέμπει πρὸς ταῦτα ἡ θυγάτηρ "Οὔτε Ἀτόσσῃ δύναμαι ἐς λόγους ἐλθεῖν οὔτε ἄλλην οὐδεμίαν ἰδέσθαι τῶν συγκατημενέων γυναικῶν. ἐπείτε γὰρ τάχιστα οὗτος ὤνθρωπος, ὅστις κοτέ ἐστι, παρέλαβε τὴν βασιληίην, διέσπειρε ἡμέας ἄλλην ἄλλῃ τάξας." ἀκούοντι δὲ ταῦτα τῷ Ὀτάνῃ μᾶλλον κατεφαίνετο τὸ πρῆγμα· τρίτην δὲ ἀγγελίην ἐσπέμπει παρ' αὐτὴν λέγουσαν ταῦτα. "Ὦ θύγατερ, δεῖ σε γεγονυῖαν εὖ κίνδυνον ἀναλαβέσθαι τὸν ἂν ὁ πατὴρ ὑποδύνειν κελεύῃ. εἰ γὰρ δὴ μή ἐστι ὁ Κύρου Σμέρδις ἀλλὰ τὸν καταδοκέω ἐγώ, οὗτοι μιν σοί τε συγκοιμώμενον καὶ τὸ Περσέων κράτος ἔχοντα δεῖ χαίροντα ἀπαλλάσσειν, ἀλλὰ δοῦναι δίκην. νῦν ὧν ποίησον τάδε· ἐπεάν σοι συνεύδῃ καὶ μάθῃς αὐτὸν κατυπνωμένον, ἄφασον αὐτοῦ τὰ ὦτα· καὶ ἦν μὲν φαίνηται ἔχων ὦτα, νόμιζε σεωυτὴν Σμέρδι τῷ Κύρου συνοικέειν, ἦν δὲ μὴ ἔχων, σὺ δὲ τῷ Μάγῳ Σμέρδι." ἀντιπέμπει πρὸς ταῦτα ἡ Φαιδύμη φαμένη κινδυνεύσειν μεγάλως. ἦν ποιέῃ ταῦτα· εἰ γὰρ δὴ μὴ τυγχάνει τὰ ὦτα ἔχων, ἐπίλαμπτος δὲ ἀφάσσουσα ἔσται εὖ εἰδέναι ὡς ἀιστώσει μιν. ὅμως μέντοι ποιήσειν ταῦτα. ἡ μὲν δὴ ὑπεδέξατο ταῦτα τῷ πατρὶ κατεργάσεσθαι. τοῦ δὲ Μάγου τούτου τοῦ Σμέρδιος Κῦρος ὁ Καμβύσεω ἄρχων τὰ ὦτα ἀπέταμε ἐπ' αἰτίῃ δή τινι οὐ σμικρῇ. ἡ ὧν δὴ Φαιδύμη αὕτη, ἡ τοῦ Ὀτάνεω θυγάτηρ, πάντα ἐπιτελέουσα τὰ ὑπεδέξατο τῷ πατρί, ἐπείτε αὐτῆς μέρος ἐγίνετο τῆς ἀπίξιος παρὰ τὸν Μάγον (ἐν περιτροπῇ γὰρ δὴ αἱ γυναῖκες φοιτέουσι τοῖσι Πέρσῃσι), ἐλθοῦσα παρ' αὐτὸν ηὔδε, ὑπνωμένου δὲ καρτερῶς τοῦ Μάγου ἤφασε τὰ ὦτα. μαθοῦσα δὲ οὐ χαλεπῶς ἀλλ' εὐπετέως οὐκ ἔχοντα τὸν ἄνδρα ὦτα, ὡς ἡμέρη τάχιστα ἐγεγόνεε, πέμψασα ἐσήμηνε τῷ πατρὶ τὰ γενόμενα.

the first to suspect that the Magian was not Cyrus' son Smerdis but his true self; the reason was, that he never left the citadel nor summoned any notable Persian into his presence; and in his suspicion—Cambyses having married Otanes' daughter, Phaedyme, whom the Magian had now wedded, with all the rest of Cambyses' wives—Otanes sent to this daughter, asking with whom she lay, Smerdis, Cyrus' son, or another. She sent back a message that she did not know; for (said she) she had never seen Cyrus' son Smerdis, nor knew who was her bedfellow. Then Otanes sent a second message, to this effect: "If you do not yourself know Cyrus' son Smerdis, then ask Atossa who is this that is her lord and yours; for surely she knows her own brother."

To this his daughter replied: 'I cannot get speech with Atossa, nor can I see any other of the women of the household; for no sooner had this man, whoever he is, made himself king, than he sent us to live apart, each in her appointed place.' When Otanes heard that, he saw more clearly how the matter stood; and he sent her this third message: 'Daughter, it is due to your noble birth that you should run any risk that your father bids you face. If this man be not Smerdis son of Cyrus, but another whom I think him to be, then he must not go unscathed, but be punished for sharing your bed and sitting on the throne of Persia. Now, therefore, when he lies with you and you see that he is asleep, do as I bid you and uncover his ears; if you see that he has ears, then you may think that he is Smerdis son of Cyrus who is your lord; but if he has none, it is Smerdis the Magian.' Phaedyme answered by messenger that she would run very great risk by so doing; for if it should turn out that he had no ears, and she were caught uncovering him, he would surely make an end of her; nevertheless she would do it. So she promised to achieve her father's bidding. It is known that Cyrus son of Cambyses had in his reign cut off the ears of this Magian, Smerdis, for some grave reason—I know not what. So Phaedyme, daughter of Otanes, performed her promise to her father. When it was her turn to visit the Magian (as a Persian's wives come in regular order to their lord), she came to his bed, and uncovered the Magian's ears while he slumbered deeply; and having with much care assured herself that he had no ears, she sent and told this to her father as soon as it was morning.

I may pass over, no doubt, the remainder of the tale, since it will be familiar to my readers. The discovery leads to the slaying of the impostor and the election of Dareios, a member of the legitimate dynasty. Herodotos and many later authors add that the killing of the false Smerdis was celebrated, annually, by the Persians, the feast being called *Magophonia*. During that

time no member of the Magi caste was allowed to show himself in the streets; all Magi had to conceal themselves carefully in the interior of their houses. According to these accounts, we are dealing with a sort of national holiday, comparable to the American 4th of July or the French 14th of July.[3] True, there have not been wanting objections to such an interpretation of the ancient texts.[4] Yet it must be admitted that from a nationalistic angle it is difficult to find fault with the narrative of the Father of History. Incredible and romanesque as it sounds in places, universal history can show many a close parallel. In particular, Oriental palace revolutions have brought on strange things. To quote an obvious example: in the stirring times of the Califate of Cordoba practically every king-maker, planning to promote some pretender of his own choice, began by invoking the testimony of the ladies of the royal harem, and they never failed to respond to the emergency call and to state, most solemnly and emphatically, that the pretender was indeed the true calif, quite wrongly thought dead long since. It is only by the comparative method that one may hope to approach the solution of the problem, and from this point of view the legend of Solomon and Ashmodai, from which we started, throws a peculiar light upon the account of Herodotos.

Nor is this all. One of the most incredible facts reported there is the mass murder of the Magi:[5]

The Persians, when they heard from the seven what had been done and how the Magians had tricked them, resolved to follow the example set, and drew their daggers and slew all the Magians they could find; and if nightfall had not stayed them they would

[3] F. Spiegel, *Erânische Altertumskunde*, Leipzig, 1871-78, II, 310; III, 586-708; *Encyclopædia Britannica*, XXV, 23 (E. Meyer).

[4] J. Marquart, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte von Eran*, Göttingen, 1896-1905, I, 64; II, 132 and 135; Prášek, *Geschichte der Meder und Perser*, Gotha, 1906-10, II, 140; Christiansen, *L'Empire des Sassanides*, Copenhagen, 1907, pp. 15 f.

[5] Herodotos, III. 79: *οἱ δὲ Πέρσαι μαθόντες τὸ γεγονὸς ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ καὶ τῶν Μάγων τὴν ἀπάτην, ἐδικαίευν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἕτερα τοιαῦτα ποιέειν, σπασάμενοι δὲ τὰ ἐγχειρίδια ἔκτεινον ὅκου τινὰ Μάγον εὕρισκον· εἰ δὲ μὴ νὺξ ἐπελθοῦσα ἔσχε, ἔλιπον ἂν οὐδένα Μάγον. ταύτην τὴν ἡμέρην θεραπεύουσι Πέρσαι κοινῇ μάλιστα τῶν ἡμερέων, καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ ὁρτὴν μεγάλην ἀνάγουσι, ἣ κέκληται ὑπὸ Περσέων μαγοφόνια· ἐν τῇ Μάγον οὐδένα ἔξεστι φανῆναι ἐς τὸ φῶς, ἀλλὰ κατ' οἴκους ἑωυτοὺς οἱ Μάγοι ἔχουσι τὴν ἡμέρην ταύτην.*

not have left one Magian alive. This day is the greatest holiday that all Persians alike keep; they celebrate a great festival on it, which they call the Massacre of the Magians; while the festival lasts no Magian may come abroad, but during this day they remain in their houses.

As will be seen, it is a piquant story of horrors but—since the Magi were the priestly caste of Persia—too good to be true. It reminds us, however, of another, quite similar one, hailing from the same general region, namely Mesopotamia, to wit, the story of the beautiful Esther. The resemblance between the two is indeed striking: in both it is a question of a mass murder. To begin with, Haman, as a true Anti-Semite, would like to have all Jews in the Persian Empire slain. Then all of a sudden the tables are turned, and King Xerxes now permits all Jews to kill their enemies, his own subjects, a permission of which they avail themselves with the greatest glee. This glorious feat is celebrated, year after year, in the so-called feast of Purim, which thus corresponds to the Magophonia. And back of it all there lurks again a typically Oriental harem story.

The historicity of the *Book of Esther* is no longer believed in by any one, if one excepts the American Fundamentalists. On the contrary, scholars have recognised, in this curious narrative, an ancient cult legend, developed, in the course of centuries, out of the Mesopotamian ritual of the Sacæa, the Babylonian New Year's celebration. According to all appearances, there was a custom of appointing two kings of the Saturnalia, or rather of the Sacæa, Haman and Mordecai, of whom the one was put to death at the end of the holiday season, whilst the other, dressed in royal garments, was paraded through the city, perhaps only to share, in the following year, the fate of his companion. Each of these two mock-kings had a female companion, a queen (Vashti and Esther), of whom again the one was rejected, while the other was proclaimed queen of the Sacæa. Whatever may be thought about the details of this ritual, it is certain that the *Book of Esther* owes its origin to the ancient and widespread custom of the Saturnalia kingship. The murder of the Persian Anti-Semites has no historical foundation whatever, but is to be explained by the ritual of a gay carnival or New Year's Eve celebration, when mannequins and masks, the representatives of the Old Year, were killed wholesale, while blood, in the form

of sweet wine and other anti-prohibition drinks, was flowing in torrents. This is the real meaning of the Jewish Purim, a child of the Babylonian Sacæa.[6] The story of Esther is a cult legend, grown out of an ancient feast, the true meaning of which had been forgotten, and is designed, aetiologically, to explain some of its δρώμενα.

Let us now return to the magophonia and the legend of Solomon and Ashmodai. In both narratives mention is made of a king who has usurped the place of the legitimate monarch (Cambyses and Solomon). In both the fraud is discovered by the ladies of the harem (or one of their number). The impostor is thereupon slain or driven out by the 'conspirators', and his companions and associates, the members of his caste, are slain, at least in the Persian story, since in the Jewish one Ashmodai, as a supernatural being, needs no helpers and is, of course, invulnerable. Finally, the rightful monarch (or his legitimate successor) is reïnstated.

There is no need, in this connexion, to discuss anew the historicity of the Persian tale: the solution proposed by Prof. Gray,[7] namely, that the false Smerdis was slain on the occasion of a tumultuous New Year's celebration, is indeed most plausible. Such festivities have always furthered conspiracies because of their democratic and popular character, to which even Oriental despots had to submit, and because the free use of masks would naturally throw down the barriers between king and aristocracy. I might only add, since Prof. Gray has not discussed the matter, that the rôle of the ladies in the false Smerdis' harem most probably belongs to the cult legend and not to history. For apart from the unlikelihood that a common offender, one who had lost his ears by the knife of the hangman, should have had the courage and an opportunity of mounting the throne (since his followers would thereby have exposed themselves quite unnecessarily to great dangers, thanks to the relatively easy discovery of the fraud), it is altogether significant that in Herodotos' narrative the impostor is indeed such a common offender. The reason is, obviously, that the king of the Saturnalia-Sacæa was as a rule a criminal, put to death at the close of the festival. The discovery of the fraud by a lady of the harem was therefore very probably

[6] Cf. Sir James G. Frazer, *The Scapegoat*, London, 1913, pp. 354 ff.
[7] Hastings' *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, V, 874 f.

one of the δρώμενα of the ritual, the more so because we definitely know that during the Saturnalia-Sacæa the royal harem was turned over to the temporary or mock-king. Thus the episode entered the account relating the historical conspiracy of Dareios. This conclusion is certainly confirmed by the Jewish parallel, the 'conspiracy' against the impostor Ashmodai, a conspiracy that no one would be tempted to regard as in any way historical.

One more objection must be removed. It is, of course, possible, on the strength of the chronology, to see in the Jewish legend but a weak copy of the Persian palace revolution as related by Herodotos. For throughout Hellenistic times Persians and Jews lived peacefully together, in the plains of Mesopotamia, and Zoroastrian influences have repeatedly been detected in post-exilic Judaism. Nonetheless I believe such a theory quite untenable, for the following reasons. Even a superficial comparison of the Jewish and Persian legends creates an impression that the former is more original, more archaic. The demon who assumes Solomon's shape to enter Solomon's palace and harem and to mount Solomon's throne, is in every respect more colourful, more genuine, more true to type than the miserable Magian who passes himself off for the dead Smerdis. The devil's foot of the rabbinical texts, which Ashmodai carefully conceals, is more purely legendary than the missing ears of the poor wretch in Herodotos' account. Let us add, finally, the vital motive of the demon's attempted incest, a trait that would have no sense whatever in the Persian, since according to the Zoroastrian religion marriages among the closest relatives not only were not regarded as reprehensible but on the contrary were considered highly meritorious. Herodotos himself relates, for example, and as a matter of course, how Smerdis cohabited with his own sister Atossa. If one wanted to derive the legend of Solomon and Ashmodai from the Persian story, one would be driven to conclude that a genuine, old demon legend was developed out of a strictly rational and rationalistic historical narrative. Such a development would be unique in the realm of folk-lore, since ordinarily it is precisely the reverse that takes place; it may therefore be regarded as rather unlikely.

The parallels quoted in this study have, I believe, put in our hands the true key of the story of Solomon and Ashmodai. There is indeed no reason whatever to suppose with H. Varn-

hagen[8] an Indian tale to be responsible for it. That great German scholar, in the last century, thought of the well-known tale of the soul-shifter, the hunchback who puts his own soul into the body of his king and then assumes the royal rôle, until unmasked by the queen, who is not slow in discovering that in her husband's royal body dwells the soul of a plebeian! I need not here refute in detail this ingenious hypothesis. After all, the only thing the Indian story has in common with the Jewish legend of Solomon and Ashmodai is the fact that an impostor has taken the place of an exiled king and that the queen discovers the fraud, resemblances that can hardly be called particularly far-reaching. True enough, the Jewish Solomon Cycle has indeed absorbed a certain number of elements clearly of Indian origin.[9] Yet the central theme, our story of Solomon and Ashmodai, hails from the Near East and is but a Jewish variant derived from an ancient Mesopotamian cult legend, explaining, aetiologically, a New Year's ritual.

Since in studies of this nature it is always useful, whenever possible, to check up on the results obtained, it may not be amiss to do so in this case. Supposing that our key is the right one, one would naturally conclude that the Solomon Cycle, preserved in nearly a hundred Slavonic and Occidental texts, all going back to the Middle Ages, should still contain some traces clearly indicative of its origin and development as outlined in the preceding pages. Such is indeed the case.

As is well known, the legend of Solomon and Ashmodai was carried from its Oriental home to Byzantium and thence to Yugoslavs and Russians. The Slavs, strangely enough, rendered the name of the demon, Ashmodai, by *Kitovras*. This name has been shown, by no less a man than the great Russian scholar Alexander Veselofsky,[10] to be but the Slavonic transscription of the Greek Κένταυρος, a fact admitting only of one conclusion, namely, that it was the Byzantines who replaced the Persian demon Ashmodai, little known to them, by the infinitely more

[8] *Ein indisches Märchen auf seiner Wanderung durch die asiatischen und europäischen Literaturen*, Berlin, 1882.

[9] Cf. *Mitteilungen der Schlesischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde*, XXXI, 148-50.

[10] *Solomon and Kentauros* (in Russian), Petersburg, 1872; cf. André Mazon, *Revue des études slaves*, VII (1927), pp. 42-62.

familiar centaur. But why by a centaur? Modern Greek folklore furnishes an easy answer to this query. The Ancient Greek centaurs are not dead but as alive as ever in the Greek countryside, though under the name of Καλλικάντζαροι, as was shown by J. C. Lawson in an excellent book.[11] These Καλλικάντζαροι are New Year's demons, that is, they appear exclusively during the time of the year that corresponds to the famous 'Twelve Nights' of Central and Northern Europe. This means that at the time when the Solomon legend was taken over by the Byzantines, its ritual and purely cultic origin had not yet been forgotten; otherwise expressed, Ashmodai still had about him the features and general nature of a New Year's demon, the character of the old king of the Sacæa.

This result had been reached when I got hold of the valuable book of M. Georges Dumézil on the Centaurs.[12] To his discussion of the Old Persian New Year,[13] entirely in harmony with the view-point of Prof. Gray, must be added an extremely important quotation from the Arabic chronicler Albîrunî, apt to remove the last doubt concerning the origin of the legend of Solomon and Ashmodai:[14]

A philosopher of the Ḥashwiyya school relates that when Solomon the son of David had lost his seal and his empire, but was reïnstated after 40 days, he at once regained his former majesty, the princes came before him, and the birds were busy in his service. Then the Persians said, 'Naurôz âmadh,' i. e. the new day has come. Therefore that day was called Naurôz.

'Naurôz' is the Persian 'New Year'!

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[11] *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion*, Cambridge, 1910.

[12] *Le Problème des Centaures*, Paris, 1929.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 55 ff.

[14] *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, transl. Sachau, 1879, p. 199; cf. Dumézil, p. 272. It is of interest to note that in the last century James Darmesteter considered possible a Persian origin of the legend of Solomon (cf. his work *Le Zend-Avesta*, II (Paris, 1892), p. 624). Yet he did not draw on the obvious parallel contained in the work of Herodotus but only on the Persian Yima legend.